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ABSTRACT

Despite the many limitations of standardized tests, schools use them to determine if children are ready for school, to group students for instruction, to diagnose learning disabilities and other handicaps, and to guide and control the curriculum and teaching methods. No test is good enough to serve as the sole or primary basis for important educational decisions for an individual child, and test content is a very poor basis for determining curriculum content and teaching methods. Students from low-income and minority groups are more likely to be retained in grade or placed in a lower track, while those from white middle and upper income groups are more likely to be given educationally advantageous placements. Because raising the test score is so often the single most important indicator of school improvement, teaching comes to resemble testing more and more. Teaching to the test can only improve student capabilities and knowledge if the test is good. Better methods than standardized tests for educational improvement and accountability already exist in assessment measures based on student performance. These methods of assessment are as reliable as are standardized multiple-choice tests and are used successfully in other nations. (SLD)

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HOW STANDARDIZED TESTING DAMAGES EDUCATION

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How Standardized Testing Damages Education

1) *How do schools use standardized tests?*

Despite their biases, inaccuracies, limited ability to measure achievement or ability, and other flaws, schools use standardized tests to determine if children are ready for school, track them into instructional groups; diagnose for learning disability, retardation and other handicaps; and decide whether to promote, retain in grade, or graduate many students. Schools also use tests to guide and control curriculum content and teaching methods.

2) *Aren't these valid uses of test scores?*

No test is good enough to serve as the sole or primary basis for important educational decisions. *Readiness* tests, used to determine if a child is ready for school, are very inaccurate and encourage the use of overly academic, developmentally inappropriate primary schooling (that is, schooling not appropriate to the child's emotional, social or intellectual development and to the variation in children's development). *Screening* tests for disabilities are often not adequately validated; that is, it is not proven that they are accurately measuring for disabilities. They also promote a view of children as having deficits to be corrected, rather than having individual differences and strengths on which to build. While screening tests are supposed to be used to refer children for further diagnosis, they often are used to place children in special programs. *Tracking* hurts slower students and mostly does not help more advanced students. *Retention in grade*, or flunking or leaving a student back, is almost always academically and emotionally harmful, not helpful. Test content is a very poor basis for determining curriculum content, and teaching methods based on the test are themselves harmful.

3) *Who is most hurt by these practices?*

Students from low-income and minority-group backgrounds are more likely to be retained in grade, placed in a lower track, or put in special or remedial education programs when it is not necessary. They are more likely to be given a watered-down or "dummied-down" curriculum, based heavily on rote drill and test practice. This only ensures they will fall further and further behind their peers. On the other hand, children from white, middle and upper income backgrounds are more likely to be placed in "gifted and talented" or college preparatory programs where they are challenged to read, explore, investigate, think and progress rapidly.

4) *How do tests control curriculum and instruction?*

In many districts, raising test scores has become the single most important indicator of school improvement. As a result, teachers and administrators feel enormous pressure to ensure that test scores go up. Schools narrow and change the curriculum to match the test. Teachers teach only what is covered on the test. Methods of teaching conform to the multiple-choice format of the tests. Teaching more and more resembles testing.

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5) *Does "teaching to the test" increase student capabilities and knowledge?*

This depends on whether the test is good. For multiple-choice tests, "teaching to the test" means focusing on the content that will be on the test, sometimes even drilling on test items, and using the format of the test as a basis for teaching. Since this kind of teaching to the test leads primarily to improved test-taking skills, increases in test scores do not necessarily mean improvement in real academic performance. Teaching to the test also narrows the curriculum, forcing teachers and students to concentrate on memorization of isolated facts, instead of developing fundamental and higher order abilities. For example, multiple-choice writing tests are really copy-editing tests, which do not measure the ability to organize or communicate ideas. Practicing on tests or test-like exercises is not how to learn even the mechanics of English, much less how to write like a writer.

6) *Don't standardized tests provide accountability?*

No. Tests that measure as little and as poorly as multiple-choice tests cannot provide genuine accountability. Pressure to teach to the test distorts and narrows education. Instead of being accountable to parents, community, teachers and students, schools become "accountable" to a completely unregulated testing industry.

7) *If we don't use standardized tests, how will we know how students and programs are doing?*

Better methods of evaluating student needs and progress already exist. Good observational checklists used by trained teachers are more helpful than any screening test. Assessment based on student performance on real learning tasks is more useful and accurate for measuring achievement - and provides more information - than multiple-choice achievement tests.

8) *Are other methods of assessment as reliable as standardized multiple-choice tests?*

Trained teams of judges can be used to rate performance in most any academic or non-academic area. In the Olympic Games, for example, gymnasts and divers are rated by panels of judges, and the high and low scores are thrown out. Studies have shown that, with training, the level of agreement among judges (the "inter-rater reliability") is high. As with multiple-choice tests, it is necessary to enact safeguards to ensure that race, class, gender, linguistic or other cultural biases do not affect evaluation.

9) *How do other nations evaluate their students?*

The U.S. is the only economically advanced nation to rely heavily on multiple-choice tests. Other nations use performance-based assessment where students are evaluated on the basis of real work such as essays, projects and activities. Ironically, because these nations do not focus on teaching to multiple-choice tests, they even score higher than U.S. students on those kinds of tests.

For further information see Fallout from the Testing Explosion, *from FairTest for $8.95.*

FairTest has other Fact Sheets on Testing. Send SASE to K-12 Fact Sheets at FairTest.